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Analysis of Ben Jonson’s “Song: To Celia”

Born in England during the Renaissance, Ben Jonson emerged as a leading playwright and poet of the seventeenth century. As an innovate man of the Renaissance, Jonson developed his own techniques in writing clear, lyrical poems such as “Song: To Celia.” The four sets of quatrains that shape this poem hold imagery and metaphors to illustrate the speaker’s desire to convince his love, Celia, to express her love for him. Thus, Jonson demonstrates his creative ability in this poem by applying imagery, figurative language, and diction to establish the speaker, tone, and theme of the poem.

Throughout the poem, Jonson establishes the speaker as a lover, the man who loves Celia dearly. The speaker maintains a first person point of view with his “I”s and “me”s found throughout. This speaker’s audience is his lover, Celia, as indicated in the title. Yet, without the indication in the title, Jonson reveals the audience as the speaker’s lover by discussing romantic topics such as a “kiss” (3), “wine” (4), and a “rosy wreath” (9). As the speaker addresses his lover, he is trying to convince her to express her love for him and “drink to me only with thine eyes,” (1).

Jonson develops a predominantly fanciful and affectionate tone in this poem as he employs imagery, metaphors, and other figurative language devices to ensure a romantic air about the poem. Within the poem, Jonson creates a fanciful tone by catering to one’s senses as if he will win Celia over by appealing to her senses. Beginning with sight, the speaker asks Celia to look into his eyes, suggesting intimate eye contact. The speaker then calls on the sense of touch for a kiss, physical affection between two people. Next comes the speaker’s appeal to taste with wine and nectar, one a delicacy of man, the other a delicacy of the gods. Finally, the scent of the roses pleases the sense of smell. Notice that each of these is objects or actions associated with romance: gazing into the other’s eyes, giving a kiss, the flavorful wine, and the fragrant roses; thus, the speaker’s appeal to the senses is an elegant call to romance. The speaker also plays up the romance through metaphors with indicate his eloquent speech and by comparing Celia to roses for the “rosy wreath… grows, and smells, I swear, not of itself but thee!” (9-16). Finally, Jonson supplements the fancifulness of the poem through consonance, which adds an extra bounce of lightness to the poem. For example, the “rosy wreath” (9) provides an additional air of weightlessness as the words float across the paper. Not only is there a fanciful, affectionate tone to this poem, but in line 13 there is a tone shift when the speaker begins to discuss the roses and how they smell of Celia. Because of this change in attitude from a feeling of love and closeness to a passionate, devotional attitude, there is a tone shift in line 13, adjusting from affection to adoration.

Finally, the theme of this poem demonstrates the beauty and immortality of love. The allusion to Jove’s nectar directly indicates that just as the gods are immortal, so is love. Through the sensory images described before regarding kisses, eyes, wine, and roses, the Jonson clearly describes the greatness of love. In fact, love is so great that in cases of true love, it is immortal. Additionally, the mention of nectar also serves as a symbol of the rich, sweetness love is, especially when that love is returned. Through vivid imagery, the speaker attempts to convince his beloved Celia to return his love to him by demonstrating her love for him. The theme of the beauty and immortality of love is embodied by the poem through its sensory imagery of loving acts and comparing Celia’s love to Jove’s nectar, a rich, immortal drink.

Ben Jonson establishes the speaker, tone, and theme of “Song: To Celia” through diction, imagery, and figurative language. Throughout the poem, a love-stricken man attempts to coax his love, Celia, into expressing her love for him by expressing his love and wishes through sensory imagery. The poem also contains consonance on many occasions, contributing to the light, airiness that contribute to the fanciful tone of the poem along with its romantic aspects, creating a fanciful, affectionate poem. Although there is one tone shift, it is merely an elevated expression of love, indicating the importance of love as an ever-lasting condition. Through these ways, the theme of the poem is established: love is beautiful and immortal.